BRUCE LEE and the Green Hornet

Van Williams remembers "Kato"

To many people in the martial arts community, The Green Hornet television series of the mid-1960s holds particular appeal and meaning. For one thing, the show marked the first time that a bona fide martial art was showcased on North American television. Furthermore, the man who showcased that fighting system every week for viewers' incredulous eyes was—and this would seem indisputable at this point in time—the greatest martial artist of the 20th century, the one and only Bruce Lee.

The television series passed out of existence after one season, but the camaraderie between the show's protagonists, the Green Hornet and Kato—or rather, Van Williams and Bruce Lee—lived on and continued to endure right up until the latter's premature death in 1973. Lee considered Williams a close and trusted friend, and vice versa. They shared certain values. Both were athletes par excellence—Lee in martial arts, Williams in motocross, bronco busting and deep-sea diving. Both were also keenly interested in the quality of the projects they were involved in, refusing to go the route of some Hollywood stars and simply "take the money and run" without regard for the finished product.

Williams also proved to be a very savvy businessman and made shrewd investments with his capital. Lee, who up until the early 1970s was still in the process of acquiring capital, often consulted with Williams on the numerous business and career moves he too was contemplating. Williams was always willing to listen to and discuss things with the budding superstar, and the former watched with pride as Lee began to fulfill the truly awesome potential that both men knew he possessed in such abundance.

In the following exclusive interview, the cordial and humorous Williams recounts some fascinating anecdotes as he recalls what it was like to work alongside the legendary Bruce Lee in The Green Hornet series.

—John Little

BLACK BELT: Working for a year on the set of *The Green Hornet,* you must have gotten to know Bruce Lee quite well. What were your impressions of him?

VAN WILLIAMS: I liked him a lot. He was real clean-cut. You could tell that he was educated and had been to college. He was perfect for [the role of] Kato. [The producers of the series] wanted him for what he did in terms of martial arts. [Producer William] Dozier saw his Long Beach [martial arts] demonstration and he said "That's Kato!"

BB: What do you recall of Lee's attitude toward the martial arts at that point in time?

WILLIAMS: Well, Bruce didn't like karate. He got a lot of people in karate turned off against him because he didn't believe in all that black belt, yellow belt, red belt—all the degrees and the way that they did it. He just didn't believe in it.

BB: Did you ever see Lee mix it up for real with anybody?

WILLIAMS: I don't know if Bruce had a real fight with anybody. I know that he'd done a lot of exhibition stuff. I also know that he kicked a few stuntmen a couple of times because he was working in close.

BB: Among other things, Lee was renowned for his emphasis on physical conditioning. Do you recall any of his workouts or exercise equipment?

WILLIAMS: Oh, he was constantly working out, doing chin-ups and stretches all the time on the set. I don't recall him using any heavy weights of any kind, like muscle-building stuff. He might have later on, but in all the times I saw him, and when he brought stuff over to my house, he always brought a new invention of his that would develop that muscle or this muscle. I remember thinking at the time that, for his size, pound for pound, he was one of the strongest individuals I had ever met.

BB: Weren't you something of a powerhouse yourself, with a background in rodeo work and motocross?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Bruce and I had a thing going for a long time, and he never did beat me on it because I was a lot bigger than he was. I had great big huge forearms from motorcycle racing. I raced motocross for a long time, and that develops forearms because you're always pulling yourself up on the bike. Anyway, [Bruce and I] always used to do this type of straight-arm wrestling, where you'd hold your arm straight out in front of you and grip hands and try and twist each other's wrist. And he never could beat me at that. He was practicing on elaborate spring things where he was turning his wrist over, and he'd come in and say "Okay, come on! Let's try it." And I'd go "Whomp!" and put him down, and it just burned him up! He had such pride that he

Interview by John Little

Kato and the Green Hornet take cover (right) behind the Black Beauty, the crimefighters' custom car, which featured front and rear rockets and gas guns, a revolving license plate, and brooms that erased the vehicle's tire tracks.

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didn't want anybody to ever beat him at anything. And he'd do this to the stuntmen, some of whom were pretty damn big. He could beat most of the stuntmen, but he never could do that against me. But, hell, I weighed 210 pounds and he weighed maybe 150 soaking wet. And I'd been riding motorcyles and doing rodeos. When you're riding bulls and broncs, you work on your grip and your forearms. I still have these great big huge forearms—like Popeye—and I don't even exercise them. In fact, Bruce used to call me "Popeye." And I remember saying to him "Look, you can get as strong as you like, but you're never going to put me down because of the weight [difference]. I weigh 50 or 60 pounds more than you." And he never could see that. I'd beat him quick—whap! And he'd jump up and get mad. "Back to the weights," he'd say. And he would go back and practice. He built a machine just to build up his forearms. He had a spring-tension thing he would just turn and turn and turn. He *did* have big forearms, but he didn't have the weight behind it to put me down. Mind you, he had incredible power for his size, and I certainly would not have wanted to get into a fight with him.

BB: Did Lee keep in touch with you after *The Green Hornet* series was cancelled?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, all the time. Even after he moved to Hong Kong, he would come into town and we'd go have lunch. Or he would call me and we'd exchange [information about] what we were doing. In fact, he called me before he left and asked me if he should go to Hong Kong to make those movies. "They're paying me nothing," he said. And I just said "Well, just do like Clint Eastwood did; tell them you'll do the first one for next to nothing, but if you do any more, you want a big escalation clause." And that's what he got. He made a bunch of money for his second and third movies he made for [Golden Harvest film company owner] Raymond Chow. We always kept in touch. I knew that he was having real financial problems because nothing had panned out for him prior to his leaving for Hong Kong. He did that *[Longstreet]* thing with James Franciscus, and he really hated that. He was just a [martial arts] teacher and really didn't have much of a part.

BB: How would you describe Lee's role, in relation to your own, on *The Green Hornet?*

WILLIAMS: We were very careful not to [portray] him as a servant to me. He wanted to be an equal, which we tried to show. We posed as [my character] Britt Reid, the wealthy newspaper publisher, and [his character] Kato, the servant, but when it came to the Green Hornet and Kato, we were equal. He was not only my

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"Bruce Lee had such pride that he didn't want anybody to ever beat him at anything."

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As Kato, the Green Hornet's crime-fighting sidekick, Bruce Lee had ample opportunity to demonstrate his martial arts skills (1-2) against the bad guys.

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friend, but my equal and my crime-fighting partner.

BB: How was Lee to work with?

WILLIAMS: Bruce was fun to work with on the set. The only thing was that he was constantly doing his martial arts stuff on the set. And he kind of bugged people by doing that. He was always coming up behind you and kicking out at your ear. Or he'd say "Hey!" and he would do a backfist [at your face]. He had everybody punch-drunk, always dodging and jumping away from him, but he was just so into that! He didn't care anything about acting; he just wanted to do his martial art and showcase it. But he had such energy! And he was a real clean-liver; he didn't drink and didn't smoke, and he couldn't stand to be around anybody who did. He worked out constantly.

BB: Adam West, who starred as Batman in the television series of the same name, wrote in his autobiography that Lee was one of the most graceful individuals—"second only to Fred Astaire"—that he had laid eyes on.

WILLIAMS: That's true. As you're probably aware, Bruce was a dancer even before he was a martial artist; that's where he got his agility from.

BB: There's a fascinating anecdote in West's autobiography about Lee nearly coming to blows with Burt Ward, the actor who played Robin on the *Batman* television series. You were on the set for that encounter. What happened?

WILLIAMS: What happened was that the producers of *The Green Hornet* series

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wanted to somehow get us on the *Batman* series to try and pick up some of *Batman's* audience. The shows weren't at all compatible. I mean, we played it straight—we were bound and determined to play it straight—and [on *Batman]* they were camping it up with "Whip! Wham! Bam!" all over the place. But they had a deal in the original script that we get into a fracas with Batman and Robin—and lose—because it was their show. And Bruce walked off the set. He said "There's no way! There's no way that I'm going to get into a fight with Robin and lose—that makes me look like an idiot!" So he actually walked off the show. He said "I'm not going to do it!" So they pacified him and this, that and the other, and I think we all ended up in a draw. We "crossed over" to that show and did it and made fools of ourselves, and then went back to *[The Green Hornet].* But Bruce just intimidated the hell out of Burt Ward. Bruce agreed to the draw, but he was going to show Robin, and evidently, Burt was scared shitless. He was so God-damn afraid that Bruce was going to tie into him over that, and he

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had all these guys watching who were going to protect him if Bruce got mad and got into it. I think he was really shaking in his boots.

BB: Why did Lee feel a need to take out his anger on Ward? It wasn't Ward's decision to have the fracas end in a draw.

Kato had a habit of leaving sets in disarray, and criminals with bruises on their bodies, on The Green Hornet television series.

20th CENTURY FOX PHOTO COURTESY OF Y. NAKAMURA

"While Bruce had no use for karate personally, he had great respect for the dedication and commitment that went into obtaining a 'real' black belt."

WILLIAMS: Well, Burt claimed that he was a black belt [in karate], but I don't think he ever learned one damn thing. And that irked Bruce. Because, while Bruce had no use for karate personally, he had great respect for the dedication and commitment that went into obtaining a *real* black belt. In fact, many of his friends and students were legitimate black belts in karate. Anyway, kids were starting to ask Robin "Can you do that kung fu thing that Kato does?" And Burt would say "Oh yeah, I'm a black belt. Watch this. And he'd do his little [fighting] stance,

The Green Hornet Returns to Television

LOS ANGELES—The classic martial arts television series *The Green Hornet*, featuring the legendary Bruce Lee, debuted in January across the United States on the fX cable station, a division of Fox Television. The station acquired 26 episodes of the series, which airs every Saturday and Sunday at 5:30 p.m. Eastern and Pacific time.

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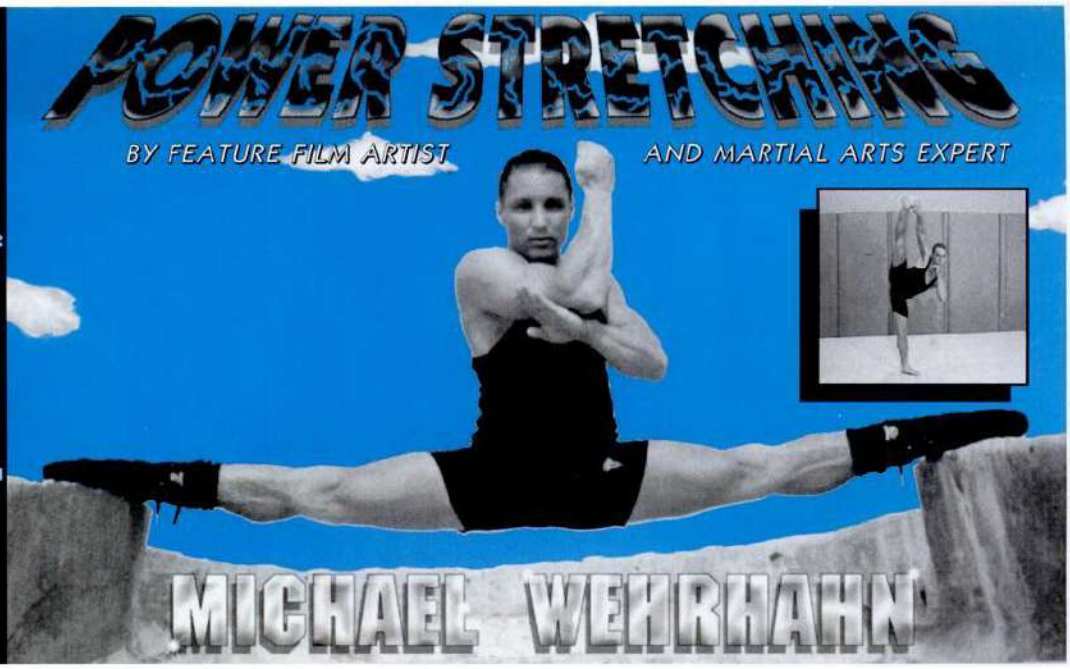

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Bruce Lee and Van Williams were not only crime-fighting sidekicks (1) on The Green Hornet television series, they were also good friends off camera (2).

which was a joke. When [Bruce and Burt] finally got together, Burt was really quaking in his boots. He really thought Bruce was going to lite into him, and Bruce made everybody think that. He told everybody on the set that he was going to tie into this guy and "show him how this [martial art] was done, and then we'll see how great a black belt he is." Bruce was stern and not joking—which is not Bruce; he was always joking and playing around on the set. But, boy, he came onto that set swaggering! And he was staring Burt down and everything else. I'm telling you, he had Burt scared to death!

BB: When was the final time you saw Lee?

WILLIAMS: I saw Bruce about two or three months before he died. He had developed these real bad migraine headaches, and he didn't know what was happening to him. And he evidently went to [doctors at the] UCLA [Medical Center] to try and figure out why he was having these migraine headaches. I didn't hear the final results of it, but they had told him preliminarily that it looked like he had pinched a nerve in his neck and it was causing all of these migraine headaches. And, of course, that basically is what killed him. He went to [Hong Kong] and evidently developed one of these headaches, and this actress said "I've got just the thing; it's a Chinese herbalist drug"—a painkiller type of thing. And he took it and lay down, and it turned out that it was an opiate derivative that he was allergic to. And his brain swelled up and he died of brain edema. The autopsy called it "death by misadventure," which means that it wasn't a suicide, but that he did something accidentally that caused his death.

BB: Do you ever think of Bruce these days?

WILLIAMS: I think of Bruce a lot. He was a great guy, a hell of an athlete, and a dear friend. I miss him a great deal.

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About the author: John Little is a senior editor at Flex magazine and is currently working on a comprehensive three-volume book series on Bruce Lee's training, philosophy and combat skills.

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